The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) has never thought of the charismatic movement as being incompatible with its Lutheran identity. Instead, it acknowledges that it owes its missional achievements to the charismatic movement that arose and spread throughout its congregations in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The EECMY’s rapid numerical growth—from about two hundred thousand in the mid-1970s to over eight million today—resulted from the Spirit’s bringing people to faith and helping them grow through the church’s mission of proclaiming the word of God to all nations. How did the EECMY embrace the charismatic renewal while maintaining its Lutheran identity, despite the storm of criticism that might have divided the church? The report of the church that finally affirmed charismatic renewal, “The Work of the Holy Spirit,” explains: “For years our congregations have been praying for a revival among our church members aimed at strengthening them in their faith and especially to help them reach out to their non-Christian brothers with the Gospel.” Consequently, when the charismatic revival first appeared, it was welcomed as “God’s answer to this prayer.” As the revival had been a long-awaited response, its initial presence was welcomed as “a revival [that] has come within our church, and this is a revival that has touched all of our synods.”

Thus the church leaders and theologians formulated thoughtful guidelines, intended to provide direction to both older and younger members of the EECMY by describing the revival as a “within revival,” not an external and “adopted experience” foreign to the church’s Lutheran identity. This effort to maintain a balance between the EECMY’s Lutheran identity and its charismatic expression had three dimensions: learning from the church’s past history, leading a Spirit-filled life in the present, and envisioning the church’s future.

The first task was learning from history. In addition to upholding the Bible and an uncompromising Lutheran confessionalism, the church’s leaders had encouraged ecumenical outreach in dealing with the challenges presented by charismatic movements. They analyzed the solutions sought by other churches around the world to address their internal conflicts caused by the rise of charismatic movements. Documents representing the official views of the Lutheran Church in America, the Methodist Church in Britain, the Church of Scotland, the Roman Catholic Church, and the United Presbyterian Church in the USA were analyzed. This posture of ecumenical learning has contributed considerably to the EECMY’s rapid growth and mature approach to theological issues in its African context.

Turning to the present, the EECMY maintains a healthy balance between its formal theology and charismatic expression at the parish level. This combination allows its congregants to lead a Spirit-filled life, not only by teaching the word but also through telling their stories of the origin and spread of the charismatic movement. Hearing the previously untold stories of charismatic renewal encourages church members to seek the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in their daily lives. In addition to engaging in continuous Bible studies and prayers, hearing these narratives of genuine spiritual revival helps believers to be expectant and eager to be filled by the Holy Spirit. Testimony is powerful.

A genuine spiritual renewal envisions the future of the church rather than serving the immediate desires of charismatic leaders. Losing hold of the future dimension of our Christian life may tempt the church to endorse a problematic agenda set by misguided revivalists with self-serving motivations instead of focusing on the Holy Spirit’s guidance of the church’s future course. To avoid an overemphasis on the church’s present situation, the EECMY teaches that,
by receiving the gifts of the Spirit, we gain a wisdom that makes us “servants of God” (1 Peter 2:16) focused on the full consummation of the kingdom rather than slaves to our own temporal desires. Likewise, as the World Council of Churches has asserted, “No actual expression of renewal is final, since renewal has its focus in the future (eschaton) towards which God is always leading His people.”

This concern for the church’s future explains why pastors and theologians of the EECMY have been vigilant about the danger of the charismatic movement when it fails to keep the church’s ultimate goal in sight.

There are many stories of personal encounters with the Holy Spirit in the Illubabor Bethel Synod (IBS) of the EECMY, particularly personal accounts of the rise of the revival, its spread, and its role in church planting and evangelistic activity. The stories retold here are based in part on interviews with three pioneering revivalists: Endalkachew Kidanewold, Rev. Mersha Seyoum, and Rev. Iteffa Gobena, President Emeritus of the EECMY.

Kidanewold and Seyoum were students living in the hostel and mission compound in Gore, a town in southwestern Ethiopia, when the revival began. Gobena was an evangelist in the Gore congregation. It was in this congregation that the hostel students living in the compound experienced spiritual revival in February 1970.

Gore is one of the oldest towns in Illubabor province and served as the provincial capital until 1978. The Gore revival was linked to the spiritual revivals that college and university students had experienced in other parts of the country, especially Harar, in eastern Ethiopia, and Bishoftu, a town lying to the southeast of Addis Ababa. Dagne Bayisa, a graduate of Harar Teachers’ Training Institute, and Tibeju Kumalo, a graduate from Debre Zeit Veterinary School, were living in Gore at the time. Dagne shared a room with Gobena, which gave them the opportunity a year before the revival began to discuss the need to be filled with the Spirit alongside intellectual reflection on biblical texts. Although Gobena expressed some reluctance about accepting what Dagne reported as his experiences, his study of Acts 19 changed his mind.

Around that same time, the students in the Gore hostel were engaged in an ongoing Bible study, led by an American missionary named Kurt Hultgren. This study led them to seek the charismatic gifts described in the Bible, especially in Acts, filling them with longing for a revival. The hostel students asked questions and were eager to know whether God repeats those miracles “in our days.”

Endalkachew Kidanewold, one of the hostel students, was touched by a strange power as he was praying for a sick lady and later asked Gobena to pray for him. Mersha Seyoum, Mohammad, and Azalech Abebe were the other students who joined Gobena’s prayer in the chapel, which was filled with an outcry after some time spent in prayer. This experience also happened to other students who were sleeping in the dormitory; they awoke and came to see what had happened. The same experience was
repeated the next morning when the elders of the Gore congregation gathered for their regular Saturday morning prayer. As Kidanewold further testifies:

At the same time the elders of the church were praying every Saturday evening for intervention, as the American mission seemed to have given up on Gore, as one of the unresponsive areas to the Gospel, with several years of labor in vain; so they thought. But one night, February 13, 1970, things changed. There was the manifestation of the Spirit of God, as spiritual hunger fell on some of the hostel students, and as they started to pray God to forgive their sins and give them the understanding of His Word and the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. From that night on, there was hunger for the Word of God and intercessory prayers and devotions.

We may infer from these testimonies that, although one cannot fully comprehend the work of the Holy Spirit, ongoing Bible study, prayers for spiritual fulfillment, and continuous personal and corporate devotion contributed to the Gore revival. As mentioned in the 1976 statement of the EECMY, “the consultation noted that the congregations had for years been praying for a revival. The charismatic renewal seems to be an answer to this prayer.”

There were two other spectacular experiences that happened almost three decades later in two rural congregations, the Wato and Bilanbillo congregations. Sunday, June 14, 1992, was the festival of Pentecost. A rural evangelist named Bezuneh Gabbisa, whose education had ended in fourth grade, delivered a well-organized sermon on Acts 2 for the Wato congregation. A lay worship leader then led a closing prayer. Although it was unusual to invite a preacher back to the pulpit for a closing prayer on the same day, the leader, Tesema Likasa, called upon Gabbisa to close the worship service in prayer. As he was praying, a sudden ecstatic shout of praise and hallelujahs overwhelmed the congregation. Many young people, including the members of the choir that sang that day, began to speak in tongues. From that moment, which marked a turning point in their spiritual lives, these young men and women preached the gospel with power issuing from a genuine longing for the expansion of God’s kingdom. As a result, that single congregation led to the formation of the EECMY’s response to charismatic gifts has three components: concern for Lutheran identity, testing the authenticity of these charismatic gifts, and encouraging believers to seek earnestly the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Just as the early Christians reported what appeared to them in their context, we must offer our own account of the Spirit’s work among us in our contemporary situations. This experience of the outpouring of spiritual gifts, coupled with the church’s motto of “serving the whole person,” proved to be significant for the proclamation of the gospel in the surrounding villages and the subsequent rapid growth of the EECMY.
cern for Lutheran identity, testing the authenticity of these charismatic gifts, and encouraging believers to seek earnestly the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In regard to its Lutheran identity, the church promotes the doctrine that the work of the Holy Spirit is founded on the word of God. Martin Luther describes the Holy Spirit as an indwelling Spirit, leading people to the Christian faith by enlightening their hearts through the word of God. This is the sanctifying, lifegiving, and saving Spirit. For this reason, the EECYM upholds the Bible as the supreme authority for faith. Particular emphasis is put on II Peter 1:19, “And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed,” whenever a charismatic movement appears in a congregation.

When the charismatic renewal began in various locations in Ethiopia in 1965, it was identified with young people, particularly university students. This age factor caused tensions to develop between the revivalist youth who were eager to propagate the charismatic movement and the older members of the institutional church who were concerned for the church’s Lutheran identity. The fact that foreign missionaries from Pentecostal churches had begun to influence the youth involved in the spiritual revival resulted in “the strong resistance within the Mekane Yesus Church during the renewal’s first years.” This tension led to a revision of the 1976 guidelines, which underscore the significance of the Holy Scripture as the supreme authority for faith, and the Lutheran confessions and the constitution of the church as inalterable components of the church’s doctrinal and institutional identity.

As for maintaining an orthodox doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the importance of testing the authenticity of charismatic gifts is given particular attention during the church’s synodical meetings and general assemblies. The occasional deviation in the practice of individuals involved in charismatic movements from the true teaching and purpose of spiritual gifts based on Scripture is the major reason for ongoing evaluation of the authenticity of charismatic gifts. The church’s openness to the work of the Holy Spirit is accompanied by careful attention to the authority of Scripture in testing the gifts, which involves subordinating the daily experience of seeking the Spirit’s plenitude to prayerful attendance on the word of God.

As a result, the church survived rejection and severe persecution under the monarchical rule of Haile Selassie, which was followed by the atheistic regime of the Derg in 1974. The church propagated the gospel even under these conditions and still maintains its identity in the face of new challenges from the prosperity gospel and from other denominations under the current liberal regime. In response to threats to the sound doctrine of the Holy Spirit—which include prosperity preaching, claiming absolute authority, and neglecting the teaching of the word—the EECYM has clearly indicated in its consensus statement that “the assignment of the charismatic teacher is to tell contemporary people that Jesus is the Lord over all the powers.”
In order to practice the charismatic gifts in the context of orderly worship, the EECMY encourages its congregations to seek the gifts of the Holy Spirit eagerly without neglecting the need to maintain order during public worship, comparable to Paul’s advice to the Corinthian Christians. While encouraging his converts to seek the spiritual gifts eagerly, Paul recommends that “all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40). To address potential conflicts over modes of worship, the EECMY guidelines recognize that every charismatic renewal entails new demands for changes in worship, which can be handled according to Article VII of the Augsburg Confession: “It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere.” The guidelines also describe the purpose of spiritual gifts as maintaining the unity of the church and leading believers to Christian maturity. Disunity and a static spirituality are viewed as “spiritual infancy.”

The final report of the 1976 guidelines “recommended that the Mekane Yesus Church be open to [the charismatic renewal], see it as a blessing and guide it according to the Word of God.” Furthermore, they recommended that “a possibility in the congregation to have meetings with more freedom and openness for the manifestation of the different gifts of the Holy Spirit. Ways of worship cannot be considered as doctrine.” Thus, for the EECMY, freedom of worship means maintaining openness to spontaneous ecstasy in the presence of the Spirit without neglecting the importance of traditional worship. The consultation recommended a well-balanced approach to the gifts of the Spirit and worship styles as follows: “But the young should also be taught the meaning of the traditional worship forms. A warning was issued against rigid formalistic worship. Also to be recognized is the danger of free worship becoming disorderly and too subjective.” Thus worship is regarded as a channel for mutual edification through glorifying God.

Eagerness for revival accompanied by biblically guided discussion and meditation has been of critical importance for the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in the entire life of the EECMY. Maintaining a strong spiritual life requires telling and retelling old and new stories regarding the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the EECMY congregations in a way that supports and encourages the charismatic Lutheranism in the contemporary church.

Moreover, the pastors and theologians of the church are dedicated to promoting unity among Christian churches worldwide, which requires sharing both the strengths and the weaknesses in charismatic movements and other global theological challenges. Our duty today is to safeguard both the charismatic renewal and the teaching of the church from distorted theologies and unbiblical practices by continually recalling the EECMY’s congregations to the church’s hard-won insights into being both Lutheran and charismatic at the same time. 

Notes
2. Ibid., 178–9.
3. Ibid., 179.
4. Ibid., 171–8.
9. This worship service took place before the Lutheran liturgy had been introduced to the congregation. Congregations of the Ilhabor Bethel Synod introduced liturgical worship after graduates from the Terfa Jarso Bible School (Terfa Jarso Seminary) were ordained and began to conduct the liturgy.
13. Ibid., 165.
15. Ibid., 168.
16. Ibid., 152.
17. Ibid., 181.
18. Ibid., 153.